

COLORADO EDUCATION: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

A DISCUSSION PAPER

Prepared for

THE COLORADO STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

This discussion paper represents the efforts of many people and the convergence of many events over time. Caught up in the events, only gradually did the people come to collectively realize that their professional lives were being changed incrementally by forces they neither anticipated nor controlled.

This reality is the way change usually overtakes societies, institutions, and individuals.

This paper, which is the culmination of the thought and experience of the leadership of the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) is presented to the State Board of Education as a reflection on and a further stimulus to the conversation we have all been having in recent times.

The aforementioned forces beyond our control have included Draconian state budget cuts, the rapid Federalization of CDE, and the growing dominance of state and federal accountability measures in the work of the Department.

These trends have been an important part of our ongoing dialogue with the Governor and the General Assembly. They also have been central to our constant conversation with members of the education community who, in their own ways, are as thoroughly caught up in these forces as we are.

In seeking a better match-up between the mission and the resources of CDE, our senior leadership has been engaged in looking not just at their own responsibility areas, but also at the entire Department and how its highly varied components fit together.

The methodology of this paper is fairly simple. Our starting point was the State Board of Education's Strategic Plan, which is the most global and coherent expression of the SBE/CDE mission.

The other key reference point was the annual CDE budget, which is the most comprehensive description of our resource allocation. It is also the foundation of our ongoing annual dialogue with both the Executive and Legislative branches over both money and mission.

Beyond these documentary reference points, our principal reliance was on the people of CDE – their knowledge, experience, and views of their work on behalf of children.

The overview that is the opening section of this paper proceeds from the well-established assumption that any plan for the future must begin with a reasonable understanding of both our past and present experience.

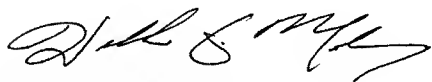
It should be noted that this overview includes some perspectives on higher education. Recently the Colorado Commission of Higher Education has most appropriately undertaken some penetrating analyses of K-12 as part of a common search for a P-16 perspective. In the same vein we in K-12 must widen our own lens to include an understanding of post-secondary education realities.

The succeeding sections – “Six Themes” – provide fairly brief reflections on those topics which in recent years have recurred again and again in our meetings and discussions about our work.

It is always possible and tempting to add to such lists, yet to do so is to indulge in the very same “mission creep” that has bedeviled education policymakers for decades.

The final section is a status report on our ongoing efforts to bring the mission and resources of CDE into the most realistic and productive relationship possible.

Common sense tells us that discussing mission and resources separately is dangerous yet, strangely, policymakers often find themselves doing just that. An overarching purpose of this paper and the impulses that led to it is to strongly push back against that tendency. In doing so, we hope to bring clarity, strength, and renewed energy to our role in helping chart a course for the children of Colorado into the bright futures we want, not for some, but for all of them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. J. Moloney', with a stylized, flowing script.

William J. Moloney
Colorado Commissioner of Education

COLORADO EDUCATION – YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW: AN OVERVIEW

Let us begin by talking about things that Coloradoans can be very proud of; things, which have made our State a national leader in Education Reform.

For more than a dozen years – led by Governors of both parties and supported by bi-partisan majorities in the Legislature – our State has built a strong foundation that facilitates the improvement of education over time.

Let us remind ourselves of the three key elements of that foundation.

First, people from all across Colorado helped create Standards for what we wanted our children to know and be able to do. This gave our schools and teachers a road map to where we wanted them to take our children.

Secondly, we created Assessments, or tests to measure how near or far from those Standards our children were, and to give us a way to measure progress over time.

Finally, we built a system of Accountability to address those situations where we were not seeing “reasonable progress over reasonable time,” and where children were trapped in failure, through no fault of their own.

Yet, while these elements give us a strong foundation, they do not build the house we want to see.

Now we must speak about serious shortcomings in our present system; problems so acute that just adding more of the familiar remedies is nothing but a recipe for continuing failure.

We must speak of challenges that call for new beginnings, and dramatically different approaches to how we shape our educational destiny.

Now, let us step back a moment and take a look at the entirety of Colorado education from pre-school to post-secondary. What do we see?

Again, we see much that is good, much that works, and much that has served our society well.

We also however, see great shortcomings and growing gaps, which, if left unremedied, will most seriously threaten the educational basis of our State's future.

So, what are those gaps and shortcomings?

Looking at the whole continuum, the greatest policy failures, and the greatest waste of human potential are at the early and later stages of the spectrum – specifically Early Childhood, on the one hand, and Secondary and Post-Secondary, on the other.

Let's look at Early Childhood Education.

A prime test for the “good society” is how it treats its youngest and most vulnerable citizens. Those in the dawn of life should always have a special call on the society whose future they represent.

All of us – educators and non-educators alike – know that our youngest children have the greatest potential for growth. If we start them on the right track, it is easier to keep them on the right track. If they have fallen off that track, it is easier to get them back on it.

We all know a small investment in a small child goes a long way, usually farther than at any time in that child's life. Conversely, we know that a much bigger investment in a much bigger child often doesn't go far at all, owing to those saddest of words: “Too late.”

So, if everyone knows how important these early years are, why haven't we made them the priority they should be?

The answer is that this vital issue has too often been lost in a fog of partisanship, misunderstanding about what needs to be done, and a lack of the will to insist that our society is at risk, if we don't find better solutions.

Now, let us look at a later stage. Let us talk about Secondary Education. Here we are mainly referring to High Schools, though almost all of the problems we see at that level can be found, in germinal form, in our Middle Schools, as well.

In the last couple of years, it seems that everyone is focusing on High Schools – the President, many Governors, and a variety of foundations and think tanks. Here in Colorado, the Children's Campaign, the Denver Public Schools, and others have launched major addresses to the problem.

All agree that dysfunction in our High Schools is a serious threat to our future. Far too many young people are dropping out of school, disrupting school, or just drifting through school, without learning very much.

High schools are the focal point of the public's greatest worry: school safety and discipline – issues that have consistently topped the Gallup Poll of Public Concerns About Public Education, for nearly three decades.

In achievement, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) demonstrates clearly that High Schools are the weakest link in our system of education. Every international comparison of education systems reaches the same conclusion.

In those other nations, student energy and productivity reaches a peak in these years, while in American high schools, incentive and the work ethic itself is moving in the opposite direction.

In the aforementioned much-discussed recent best-seller, The World Is Flat, Thomas Friedman demonstrates just how ominous these trend lines are. What is at stake is nothing less than our nation's ability to sustain American pre-eminence in a Twenty-First Century Economy.

Finally, let us say a few words about post-secondary education.

Let's begin by examining a Great Myth: American Higher Education is the envy of the planet - clear proof that our system of education is not only the best in the world, but also a sure guarantee of U.S. dominance, far into the future.

Now, let's look at the reality. What is the "envy of the planet" are the great American research universities where, over decades, vast infusions of government and corporate monies did indeed build magnificent centers of learning that produced a large proportion of the technology and other modern marvels that have transformed our lives for the better.

It should be noted, however, that these places make up significantly less than 10% of American institutions of higher education, and even in these wonderful places, a growing number of those who teach and study there do not hold American passports. More importantly, most of Colorado's college students don't go to these places.

Let's talk about those places to which our students do go. Let's look at those places and the very serious problems they face.

We all know the old saying that "time is money." Here are some telling examples.

What we used to quaintly call a "four year degree" now, on average, takes nearly six. As this trend unfolded over the years, the cost to taxpayers has been enormous. This amount however, has been but a fraction of the cost to parents and the students, themselves, not just in added tuition and other fees, but in the lost wages – never to be recovered – entailed by the delay in finishing their education.

One cause of this delay is that nearly one-third of students who arrive for "higher education" must begin with a form of "lower education," called "remediation." They get no course credit for it, but they – and the taxpayer – still must bear the cost.

Another alarming trend line is the steadily decreasing proportion of students gaining degrees in technology, engineering, and the “hard sciences.” From the graduate-school level, on down, when we ask professors the reasons for this, the answer is the same: Lack of interest, incentives, and preparation at the previous levels.

The World Is Flat pointed out that a major reason for “outsourcing” American jobs is simply that workers “over there” have those degrees and those skills. Increasingly, workers “over here” don’t. We ignore this trend line at our peril.

So, what is to be done? It is fair to ask how we should deal with these issues and problems, ranging from early childhood to post-secondary education.

Some may be a little apprehensive at this point. You are thinking: “Oh-oh, here’s where they start talking about the wonderful new programs they will introduce to fix these problems, but I bet they won’t mention the new monies they will need to pay for them.”

It is good however, to be a bit of an idealist, and to share in the hopes and dreams of the people we serve. Above all else we must be realists. We must see the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. Only then can we honestly do the job the people expect of us.

We do not live in an age of new programs, simply because we do not live in an age of new money.

Anyone looking realistically at Colorado’s economy and the resources available to us knows this to be true.

Similarly, don’t look to Washington for salvation, either. That is just not going to happen.

These are simply the facts of the matter. We would be deceiving ourselves if we said otherwise.

We are also not going to tell people that we can solve our problems, and pay for solutions, by simply eliminating waste in current spending.

We would be the last to say there is no waste in Education Departments or in education spending generally, but will not falsely suggest that our future can be financed simply by squeezing inefficiencies out of our current spending priorities.

What we can say however, is that the new beginnings and the dramatically different approaches of which we spoke earlier can be achieved through a conscious recasting of our educational priorities, through a rational series of choices which result in a much better match-up between the money we have and the Mission and priorities we must address, if we are to ensure our children’s future, and that of our State, as well.

So, what are the specific things we should change, to make better use of existing resources?

First, we should remind ourselves that education represents nearly half the total expenditure of State government. If we add what local government spends, well over half of all public expenditure in Colorado is allocated to schooling, of one kind or another.

Given these blunt facts, it is fair to ask the following questions: How effectively and how often do we evaluate and audit these vast expenditures? How easy is it to change the mix of priorities? How much opportunity is there for choice and creativity, on the part of either providers or consumers?

The answers are that evaluation is hopelessly superficial and that auditing is rare. Changing the priority mix is akin to moving a cemetery. As for choice, and creativity, or any intelligent link to market forces, that is so politically incorrect that most people won't even bother with the conversation.

Billions of dollars flow out to our 178 school districts through the School Finance Act. Every year it is, by far, the biggest bill passed by the Legislature. It is mainly driven by a series of distribution formulas, which have been built, over many years, and represent a strange mix of perceived need and political compromise.

Any attempt to change these formulas in a significant way risks political controversy to a high degree. Truly, opening these formulas risks launching a battle of winners and losers among school districts and also among those who represent the many sub-populations whose interests are represented within the School Finance Act.

Nonetheless, we are asserting that a reform of the School Finance Act is a challenge that must be undertaken. If we fail to do this, then our basic educational priorities will not change, at the very hour that the needs of our children and our society demand such change.

We submit that it is possible to build a coalition involving Governor and General Assembly to make the fundamental changes we need. I believe there are elected officials in both parties who are prepared to redesign priorities in a constant cost environment. I believe such people will be prepared to make the needed trade-offs between the Early Childhood and the Secondary sectors of our system.

We further believe that this can be done without that war of winners and losers among districts and interest groups, by guaranteeing stable funding in return for requiring that resources be used in different and better ways.

Before proposing ideas for post secondary education, let us step back together and look at the big picture.

Post-secondary per pupil expenditure in the U.S. is, on average, two to three times higher than in any other industrial nation. On average, it is fifty percent higher than per pupil expenditure in K-12, even though it does not have Special Education or transportation, like K-12.

What U.S. post secondary, K-12, and other nations have in common is that most money goes into personnel. I think students, parents, elected officials, and ordinary citizens have an interest in knowing why our system of Higher Education is so much more cost-intensive than these other sectors.

We all know that recent budgets have been very hard on Colorado Higher Education. We understand the desire of many people to restore those cuts.

However, does it make any sense to simply rebuild the house of Higher Education, in exactly the same way it was in years past?

No, it does not. Instead, we should use this time as an opportunity to look for the same new beginnings and dramatic changes in Higher Education that we contemplate for K-12.

Education is a big subject. This overview is far from exhaustive. It does, however, give us a framework for further discussion.

Several of these themes will be dealt with further, later in this paper, but first they all needed a context in the broader sweep of Colorado education.

Roy Romer once said, "Colorado is a great place to raise a child." It still is. Those of us in positions of responsibility today have an obligation to ensure that this shall always be true.



II. SIX THEMES

A. PRIORITIZING SCHOOL FINANCE: CHANGE IN A CONSTANT COST ENVIRONMENT

Everyone knows the disproportionate amount of time consumed by the issue of funding in all discussions relating to education. We discuss it in terms of legislation, lawsuits, constitutional amendments, and of course, budgets, be they our own or someone else's.

Usually, the SBE/CDE is a passive spectator to all these monetary transactions. What we will now discuss represents an opportunity for us to be a leading participant in a monetary transaction of great potential worth to education.

Generally, it is easy to unify education advocates around an initiative if it generates new money. In the General Assembly, however, the reverse is true. If an initiative requires new money (i.e. a serious fiscal note) it is usually "dead upon arrival." Accordingly, we have concluded that important initiatives must be advanced, not by generating new money, but by moving around some old money.

First, what kind of initiatives are we talking about? Let us say we decide that Early Childhood Education and Literacy are very, very important goals. Accordingly, it would make sense to transfer money away from less important things, and apply it to the more important things.

There are two ways we can go about this – one within our own control, and the other requiring a persuasive conversation with the Legislative and Executive branches.

We can begin to model good behavior by closely examining the CDE mission and its resource allocation, and shifting our points of emphases toward Early Childhood Education and Literacy.

The much greater challenge and the much greater payoff come if we are able to show the Governor and the General Assembly how they could do the same things by making alterations to the School Finance Act.

What kind of "alterations" are we talking about? Here are two examples which, taken together, represent a cost center of approximately \$125,000,000:

PART-TIME ENROLLMENT

One area that has been up for discussion multiple times in recent past is the topic of part-time pupils, yet the process continues unchanged. The number of part-time pupils in grades 1-8 is growing. It appears that there are pockets of part-time programs provided by certain school districts across the State, some with percentages of part-time pupils exceeding 2% of the total pupil population of the district. Other districts have much lower participation and most of the students enrolled part-time appear to be in the upper grade levels in those districts. Some of the part-time pupils may be Special Education students on IEPs, whose services and funding would continue unchanged.

It would be interesting to look at the achievement levels of those part-time populations, especially in grades 1-8, to try to determine if these programs are successful. Since there are only 5,344 part-time pupils counted for FY2005-06, it may be possible to look at the individual student data to determine if these children are even being tested. If they are not being tested, are those "no scores" contributing to low ratings for individual schools?

Some issues have surfaced from administrators of on-line programs concerning their lack of ability to obtain grades for certain students for the prior year from some school districts. Some students did not earn grades or grades were not provided for some classes. Therefore, credit for the students' classes, paid for by state and local dollars, may not have been provided toward advancement from grade to grade, or toward earning a diploma. Additionally, the classes may be elective, rather than core subject classes, which may have a lower cost associated with the instructional delivery of those classes.

The State Board is responsible for part-time funding. Pursuant to 22-32-109 (1) (n), C.R.S., pupils are required to have pupil/teacher contact of 1,056 hours for secondary and 968 hours for elementary per year, and this does not address part-time funding for any grade level except preschool and kindergarten. State Board Rule allows pupils to be funded at half PPR if they have scheduled classes between 180 and 720 hours per year and full PPR if they have scheduled classes beyond 720 hours per year.

Limiting the number of pupils that could be funded as part-time students would not always save dollars that could be re-directed. However, the educational services provided to the students may be of a better quality, and that could be considered "reform" in and of itself.

REPEATERS

In FY2004-05, there were 16,537 students in grades K-12 that repeated the same grade as in FY2003-04, at a cost of \$93,612,019. This may be an area in which a "disincentive" could be built into the system to fund repeaters at a lower level, and use the remainder of the monies for educational reform measures.

For instance, if the repeaters were funded at 90% for the first year they repeated a grade, the cost of the repeaters for FY2004-05 would have been \$84,250,817, and \$9,361,202 would have been available for other reform measures. Possibly the second year the students repeated the same grade, the percentage of reimbursement could be reduced to 50%.

We may see the number of repeaters at the K-1 levels be reduced with the new age requirements of 5 years of age by October 1, for Kindergarten students, and age 6 by October 1, for first grade students. Those two grade levels have repeaters at or near double the numbers seen in grades two through eight. In grades nine through twelve, the numbers are significantly higher.

Grades nine and twelve are the years with the highest percentage of repeaters. If the “disincentive” were applied only to those grade levels, the reform dollars would be generated on a total cost of approximately \$39,300,604, or about 42% of the total K-12 costs.

There are multiple scenarios that could be built around the cost of repeaters. The following gives a statewide profile of Repeaters in FY2004-05.

**Number of
Students That
Repeated a Grade
Level in FY2004-
05, by Grade
Level**

Grade Level	Number of Students Repeating Grade*	Percent of all Repeaters	Percent of K-12 Repeaters	Total Membership	Repeaters as Percent of Membership	Total Cost of Repeaters
PK	5,343	24.4%		21,395	25.0%	10,887,743.59
KINDERGARTEN**	1,044	4.8%	6.3%	56,968	1.8%	3,156,841.58
GRADE 1	1,526	7.0%	9.2%	58,799	2.6%	9,307,058.54
GRADE 2	626	2.9%	3.8%	56,634	1.1%	3,780,347.76
GRADE 3	381	1.7%	2.3%	56,471	0.7%	2,278,707.94
GRADE 4	267	1.2%	1.6%	56,428	0.5%	1,594,474.80
GRADE 5	298	1.4%	1.8%	56,903	0.5%	1,815,560.00
GRADE 6	476	2.2%	2.9%	58,301	0.8%	2,823,547.96
GRADE 7	629	2.9%	3.8%	59,555	1.1%	3,720,836.92
GRADE 8	566	2.6%	3.4%	59,413	1.0%	3,340,492.51
GRADE 9	3,876	17.7%	23.4%	64,465	6.0%	23,502,145.55
GRADE 10	2,226	10.2%	13.5%	57,704	3.9%	13,285,159.94
GRADE 11	1,593	7.3%	9.6%	52,799	3.0%	9,208,387.47
GRADE 12	3,029	13.8%	18.3%	50,401	6.0%	15,798,458.24
DETENTION				421		
Total	21,880	100%		766,657	2.9%	104,499,762.75
Total: K-12	16,537		100%	745,262	2.2%	93,612,019.16

* Reflects the number of students in terms of a head count, rather than a funded pupil count.

**Of the 1044 Kindergarten Headcount, 870 are Half-Day Kindergarten and 174 are Full-Day Kindergarten.

It should again be stressed that only a marginal amount of these monies could be redirected to other reforms. Still the sum would be substantial, and these are just two examples of what can be found when the immense School Finance Act is scrutinized by knowledgeable eyes with the time to do a careful analysis.

We have earlier noted that touching the School Finance Act can easily set off a political battle royal of winners and losers. However, we believe this process could be detoxified by inserting a reasonable “hold harmless” provision. This means that a district that was disallowed certain monies for, say, repeaters could retain that money, as long as it was redirected to approved programs in Literacy and/or Early Childhood Education.

Here is a final example of how old monies could be redirected to new initiatives: Post-Secondary Options or 5th Year Programs.

Every student who moves through the K-12 system draws a State subsidy of approximately \$80,000. The school district investment, on average, antes up a similar amount, bringing the total for the one student to \$160,000. Again, there are many scenarios possible, but why couldn't a “qualified” student “earn” a modest proportion of that total to be applied to college tuition.

In what way might a student “qualify?” Graduating after 11th grade, skipping a grade, attending a technical school, in lieu of the final two years of high school (very attractive for many potential drop-outs), exemplary community service, or exemplary performance on the CSAP are all possibilities that would involve zero cost to the taxpayer, yet provide serious incentives to students and parents alike.

Productive reform initiatives can be advanced in a constant cost environment if only we have the imagination and the determination to make it happen.

B. EARLY CHILDHOOD: THE UNKNOWN IMPERATIVE

One of the things that everyone involved with education knows is that intervening in the lives of younger children is much more likely to succeed than is the case with older children.

Think of all the speeches you have heard and articles you have read that in one way or another make this very assertion and stress the vital importance of Early Childhood Education. Reflect also that you haven't encountered even one speech or article that argues the opposite proposition i.e., that later interventions should be preferred.

Think also of the wealth of research that has emerged in recent years concerning the development of the human brain, all of it pointing to the extraordinary receptivity of the young child to learning. From language acquisition to skill development, the capacity of the young child for learning and general cognitive growth is incontrovertibly higher by far than at any other time of life.

Now reflect upon the fact that "what everyone knows to be true" has had virtually no impact on how we fund and operate our system of education. The proverbial "man from Mars" examining that system would be quite certain that we attached no value whatsoever to the early years.

In Early Childhood Education we have before us the greatest educational bargain in history, yet we refuse to buy it.

In an age properly riveted by the dangers of the achievement gap, we have within our reach the means to prevent it even occurring, yet somehow we seem little interested in that possibility. We seem almost to prefer watching that gap grow through the early years, rousing ourselves to action only at the point where, for far too many children, it is already too late.

When we seek reasons to explain our strange behavior we get varying answers. Some point to sterile political arguments over who should be responsible for all this. Others cite disjointed educational debate over what is the best approach to this problem.

Perhaps the most persuasive answer is that we have always been like this, and frankly we lack a real will to change ourselves. A corollary to this answer is that the existing system has worked well enough for most children, particularly those from that strata of society whose opinions have always counted the most.

Is this disregard for Early Childhood Education at all surprising, in a country that fawns over the concept of bi-lingualism for all children, yet operationally believes that the best time to start foreign language study is at the 8th or 9th grade?

Is it surprising, in a country that now obsesses over the “leaky pipeline” – too few children going to college, particularly minorities – yet begins its search for answers by looking at 11th and 12th grade requirements?

All of this suggests that, as “education reformers,” our ability to “connect the dots” is deeply flawed.

It also suggests that as the “Flat World,” of Thomas Friedman, fully emerges, the next generation will be in serious trouble if our “dot connecting” abilities don’t improve greatly and quickly.

In education we are always looking for the big breakthrough and large impacts for small investments.

We deeply believe that energizing our attention to Early Childhood Education and redirecting investment accordingly, represents a rare opportunity for just such a breakthrough. In terms of impact, its potential far surpasses anything else now on the horizon.

At the very least, it is worth the most serious conversation and investigation. At the very most, it can utterly transform the landscape of American education and bring a hopefulness to the cause of reform that is sorely lacking today.

C. **LITERACY: WITHOUT WHICH LITTLE ELSE MATTERS**

In the current legislative session, a bill was filed that sought to insure that no Colorado child would ever be taught physical education by other than a “highly qualified” (i.e., fully licensed) Physical Education teacher. The bill advocates linked their efforts to the newly discovered national “crisis” of childhood obesity, and asserted that the new law would lead directly to thinner, healthier children. Who could be against that?

At a deeper level, this impulse exemplifies the common desire to solve all problems at once, which runs the risk of solving no problems ever.

Another example is the recent travail of Denver’s new Superintendent Michael Bennett, who, upon discovering that thousands of his students were making little or no progress in becoming literate, advanced the eminently reasonable idea that they should be given more time in the school day to pursue this vitally important task.

Immediately a firestorm of controversy broke out, largely orchestrated by a varied array of people who feared that the extra time for literacy would be taken from their own favored specialties.

These current examples of “turf wars” are all too common, and collectively, they represent a severe threat to the efforts of public education to reconstitute itself at the level of effectiveness today’s world requires.

In an environment of scarce resources, no resource is more precious than time. In any school, no decision is more important than the one that distributes time among its educational priorities.

In a simpler age, the “3 R’s” was a reasonable description of both the school’s priorities and how it allocated time. Today, priorities are much more numerous, and time is distributed to teachers and students in a wide variety of ways. Yesterday’s “common requirements” is today’s “individual options.”

The complexity of today’s decisions about time often makes it difficult to determine who is responsible.

Is it the teacher, the counselor, the principal, the parent, or the student? The answer is: any combination of the above. This complexity, mission proliferation, and group accountability, all militate toward greater likelihood of uncertainty, poor focus, and low intensity of effort.

We strongly assert that the good organization, like the good school, must be able and willing to rank order those priorities that it has accepted as legitimate elements of its mission, and to allocate its resources accordingly.

We further assert that, among the legitimate missions of any school or education organization, none can be ranked more highly than literacy. The child who lacks literacy will fall short in all other endeavors. Literacy is the foothold that is the necessary precondition of all other learning expeditions.

At every level of education, our most serious problems are closely linked to deficiencies in literacy. The child who is two years below grade level in reading is ten times more likely to drop out of school than the child who is on grade level. Similarly, is that child less likely to graduate from high school? Among the nearly 30% of entering college students who require some form of remediation, nearly all have significant reading deficits. Similarly, the greatest predictor of math failure is poor reading skills.

All of these things strongly make the case for literacy as the paramount goal of education. The literate child has a good chance of success in every other educational field. The literate child is well-equipped for the task of self-teaching which has always been a key attribute of the well-educated person.

Mr. Bennett was absolutely correct in his inclination toward the importance of literacy. We have an obligation of vigorously supporting him and all others like him. We also have an obligation to assist those for whom the primacy of literacy is not yet a self-evident truth.

D. CHOICE: THE UNFOLDING REVOLUTION

Among the transforming changes that have altered public education and popular perceptions of it, none has generated more media attention and political controversy than Choice.

In actuality Choice has had only a very marginal impact on the vast landscape that is public education, but its significance has been profound and its future potential is almost limitless.

An insight from the much-quoted Friedman notes that, in the past, business told the consumer what to like. Today, increasingly, the consumer not only tells businesses what to produce, but punishes them severely if they don't respond.

So it is with Choice, and this dynamic explains how it is simultaneously viewed as both hopeful and threatening.

The emergence of choice was a strong signal (consistently supported by polling data) that a significant portion of the public wanted an educational experience for their children different from what was then available.

While vouchers generated most of the political/media noise, Charter schools quietly emerged as the moderate face of Choice. Bill Clinton's strong support (praise, conferences, money) was the final seal of its mainstream status.

Charter schools, however, were not the end of the Choice revolution, but only the beginning. Today as one state school chief told the New York Times, "On-line education is the 800 pound gorilla of the Choice movement."

On-line has emerged in a quiet, almost stealth-like manner. Just as charter schools were originally confused with long-accepted magnet or theme schools, so on-line (or cyber) schools have only slowly been distinguished from the very conventional phenomena of "distance learning."

Here in the City of Denver, we can find all of the above-noted Choice options, and more – theme schools, charter schools, contract schools, and now on-line schools.

They can be sorted in terms of their degree of independence from the school district, the nature of their funding stream, and the character of their labor agreements.

Today, school authorities – both State and local – are in a position much like Friedman's old-time businesses. Long accustomed to telling people what they should like, and what they could have, they are now confronted with a less passive consumer-oriented public that is pushing back with growing insistence.

On-line represents a quantum leap in the growth potential of Choice because it has transcended what has long been the greatest constraint on expansion: geography. Significantly, the two fastest growing on-line outlets in Colorado are tiny school districts – Branson and Vilas – perched in the remotest areas of the state.

The task for education policymakers is reduced to what has always been their most fundamental responsibility: judging what works for children and families. Any education source – from home schooling to on-line schooling – that can successfully meet that criterion has a legitimate claim on our support.

Policymakers must know however that establishing those criteria, and fairly measuring the many choice options against them, will be no easy task, nor will it be without controversy.

Like every new frontier in our history, the ever stretching horizon of Choice abounds with both opportunities and dangers. As always, ordinary people have begun their unstoppable trek across that frontier, and Government has little option, but to follow them and serve them as best we can.

E. DATA AND ACCOUNTABILITY: A CONTINUUM

If you asked the question “What one thing has changed public education more than anything else in the last fifteen years?” there could only be one answer: The Rise of State Accountability Testing.

Before this seminal development, if you wanted to know how your local schools were performing, only the schools themselves could tell you, and not surprisingly, they did so with just a bit of bias. Their favored method of reporting was the old norm referenced test which measured children not against what they actually knew or could do, but rather against what a carefully selected group of other children knew or could do. The result of all this was a hodge-podge of countless different tests, benchmarked against countless different “norms,” which actually allowed a situation (documented by the USDOE) where 85% of the children in the country were “above the national average.”

All of this changed dramatically when a group of activist Governors – mostly Democrats – led by such as Roy Romer, Bill Clinton, and Jim Hunt, pushed for and got uniform state testing that allowed every school in the State to be compared with every other school. A further important change was that the new tests weren’t norm-referenced, but criterion-referenced, which meant that kids weren’t measured against other kids, but against an absolute standard of what it was thought they should know, and be able to do.

The first thing the public noticed about the new tests was that the results were much worse. State after State (Colorado, in 1997) went from an era of most kids being “above the national average” to one of most kids being “below the State standard.”

This annual cascade of bad news stunned and upset the public. Those already suspicious of their schools felt they now had proof their suspicions were justified. Those who thought their schools were okay, now had to think again. Urban minorities, long unsatisfied with their children’s education, now gained strong evidence of what many saw as educational malpractice.

The adverse results also galvanized a generation of elected officials to pass laws aimed at “fixing” what they reasonably viewed as an unacceptable situation.

In Colorado, Governor Romer signed into law the Accreditation Accountability Act of 1998. Two years later, Bill Owens delivered the School Accountability Reports, and two years after that, the President of the United States topped them all, winning overwhelming passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, which based its sharp-edged and intrusive reform measures almost entirely on the new State accountability tests.

As these events unfolded across the country, a new thought entered the conversation around testing. Could these test results, now mostly used to judge and frequently criticize schools, actually be used to help them improve?

The test results contained a wealth of data, if only we could properly master how to organize, analyze, report, and store it. When disaggregated by sub-groups, or even down to the individual student level, this data represents invaluable clues as to what components of instruction aren't working for a particular child, and hence what methods or interventions might be most useful in lifting him or her toward proficiency.

In area after area, new and better data, driven by new and better technology, is revealing more accurate pictures of educational realities. Be it data regarding instruction, drop-out/graduation rates, or spending trends, to name but a few, all are driving us down a road toward better accountability and a more responsive system.

Absent State accountability tests and the industry-wide changes spawned in its wake, little if any of these things would be happening. Still, we are now only beginning to tap the full potential of data technology's capacity to transform both instruction and accountability.

Progress, while impressive at one level, remains slow and uneven. Technical obstacles and cost factors remain daunting. Yet, that Promised Land is clearly in view, and that sight should energize our determination to get there, as soon as possible.

F. FOCUS, INTENSITY, AND THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

When the first CSAP results came out, in 1997, everyone pored over the results hoping to find islands of success amidst a sea of disappointing performance.

Governor Romer, the media, and CDE all found the tiny school district of La Veta. CDE went a step further and sent someone out to find the explanation for the truly impressive 4th grade reading scores the district had achieved. What they found was one teacher of a 17-student 4th grade who was not only very able, but also absolutely on fire about teaching reading.

In 1998, La Veta slipped off the radar screen, to be succeeded by the almost legendary Bessemer Elementary School in Pueblo 60. Though a larger more media-accessible environment, Bessemer had one important thing in common with La Veta. When we met with Bessemer's four 4th grade teachers, they reported first on how monumentally embarrassed that they were by their dreadful 1997 scores ("We didn't even want to go to the local mall, for fear that someone would recognize us."). The second thing that they told us was that these feelings of deep remorse fired their enthusiasm to devote themselves, heart and soul, to attacking the problem of reading skills for their students. The spectacular results they achieved were a measure of the depth of that passionate commitment.

In subsequent years, Bessemer was eclipsed by many other schools in Pueblo 60, which achieved even better results, and all across the State we began to find other examples of similar success.

La Veta and Bessemer established an unvarying pattern: absolutely every classroom, school, or district where we have found success, we have found two characteristics: focus and intensity.

In larger "units of success," such as schools or districts, we found the added variable of leadership that could succeed in spreading focus and intensity throughout the environment.

An additional lesson of greatest importance was taught to us in Pueblo, later in Fountain-Ft. Carson, and in other districts, including a great number of small communities like South Conejos. What they taught us is that, contrary to the conventional wisdom that "success is just about having the kids who are easy to teach," focus and intensity worked just as well with children of poverty and color.

This is not to deny that we commonly find children of poverty and color scoring less well than their more affluent white counterparts, but the point is that this divide does not occur in anything like the same degree, when all children are brought within the circle of focused and intense instruction.

The critically important point to be made here is that we know what works. Our problem very clearly is that we are not doing what works in all of those places that so desperately need just that.

This is not a new insight. It was articulated over thirty years ago by Ron Edmonds, arguably the most thoughtful of American School Reformers. It is worth repeating:

"We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us.

We already know more than we need to do that.

Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far."

These three sentences should be reflected upon by every American educator. All American educators should look into the mirror and ask themselves "how they feel about the fact that we haven't so far."

It is easy to find excuses. "The Legislature hasn't funded the needed professional development." "Severe staff cuts prevent us from doing this even though we would really like to." These excuses don't cut it.

Let us summarize:

We know what is wrong (there is an achievement gap).

We know what works (focus and intensity).

To paraphrase Edmonds, the question we have to answer is "do we have the will to do what works to fix what is wrong?"

It is fair to ask what this means for an organization, be it a school district or a State agency, like CDE.

Here is the best possible answer:

The core of our mission is to lift achievement for all students. Within that core mission is a special obligation to rescue our most vulnerable children from conditions of failure. This latter of course refers to the achievement gap and to conditions which are often appalling.

Here is where leadership comes in. If we truly believe these things then our every activity – meetings, committees, and tasks – must be tested against our commitment to this core mission.

In a condition of scarce resources, which is a common circumstance for educational organizations, we have the added chore of committing ourselves to putting aside or reducing in scope every activity which can't be connected to our core mission.

Make no mistake, this is not easy. As always, the preferred drill – just like budget-making in Washington – is to keep doing everything you have ever done for anybody, and then make everyone happy by adding to it.

In the end, the test of our leadership will be how we come down on all of this – not what we say, but what we do.

III. CDE: AS WE ARE AND AS WE MIGHT BETTER BE

As of January 10, 2006, The Colorado Department of Education consisted of 305 individuals. Of these, 231 (76%) were Federally funded, 56 (18%) were State funded, and 18 (6%) were cash funded (fees from Educator Licensing).

Three of these individuals were in the Office of the Commissioner, and two comprised the Office of the State Board Relations. The remaining 300 all work in the nine Cabinet level Units that report directly to the Commissioner.

Let us look briefly at each of these Units, their current functions, and how they have been changed by the developments of recent years. We will proceed from the largest to the smallest. Note that the number in brackets following the name of the Unit indicates how many positions are currently assigned there.

1. OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT SERVICES (79)

Led by Chief of Staff Karen Stroup, the Office of Management Services (OMS) is, by a wide margin, the largest unit within CDE, comprising slightly more than a quarter of all of our employees.

The largest units within the Department in descending order of size are Information Management Systems, Grants Management, Nutrition and Transportation, Accounting, Public School Finance, Data and Research, Auditing, and Human Resources.

In addition to offering support to every other department within CDE, OMS is directly linked to every school district in the State, in terms of its various components.

While many of those components represent “traditional” services, others, notably Information Management Systems and Data and Research have been dramatically transformed in this Age of Accountability. By way of example, since 2001, the School Accountability Reports (SARs) have become – from the huge volume of data gathering, to the printing and delivery of the SARs – the most consuming single task within OMS.

Every new Accountability Law and the accompanying drum beat of media attention has a primary impact on OMS. Be it dropout/graduation rates, school safety data, or anything to be found on the SARs, the questions most commonly link back to OMS.

2. EXCEPTIONAL STUDENT SERVICE (54)

Soon to be headed by former Cherry Creek Director of Special Education, Dr. Edward Steinberg, the Exceptional Student Services Unit (ESS) has been fairly stable in both size and function over recent years.

Almost totally dependent on federal funds (all but two positions), ESS deal with Special Education, but also includes gifted education.

Like their school district counterparts, ESS has worked over the years to break down those walls which have historically separated Special Education from all other kinds of education. Reflecting the gradual changes in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), ESS has sought to balance its statutory responsibilities for compliance with a strong focus on student learning in general and literacy in particular.

A positive reflection of this effort is the success of the CSAP-A, which has rested on the premise that "if all children can learn including our special children, then all children can be assessed as well."

3. OFFICE OF THE STATE LIBRARY (37)

Led by Gene Hainer, the Office of the State Library (OSL) is quite different from other units of CDE in that it is the only one that has a large clientele external to school districts.

It has responsibility for the Colorado Talking Book Library, State Library Services at Institutions, and the State Publications Library. These three components are served by 60% of the OSL staff of OSL. A major challenge of recent years is that Library Services were absolutely decimated by State budget cuts during the recent economic downturn.

Fully 79% of State funding to Libraries was simply eliminated. Accordingly, the OSL has had as a major task providing leadership to the State's library community, as it sought to deal with these harsh realities.

4. CENTER FOR AT-RISK EDUCATION (35)

The Center for At-Risk Education (CARE) is composed of Prevention Initiatives (about half of total staff), Family Literacy, and Service Learning, all headed by Dr. David Smith.

Traditionally, this Unit has had more to do with Early Childhood Education than any other. A major difficulty is that most of these activities are driven by a very wide array of Federally funded programs that often overlap with one another and often must be mounted in conjunction with other state agencies.

Nonetheless, over the years, this Unit has been responsible for some notably successful programs, and in recent years, has particularly sought to strengthen ties with other education Units, both within and without the Department, that serve similar populations.

5. OFFICE OF SPECIAL SERVICES (34)

Led by Bill Windler, the Office of Special Services (OSS) is about evenly divided between its Consolidated Federal Programs (principally Title I and Title II) and Competitive Grants and Awards components. Not to be overlooked, is the small, but prominent Schools of Choice component.

Like their counterparts across the nation, OSS has been powerfully wrapped in the high profile embrace of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). As the long and intrusive reach of NCLB has entered into, and begun to profoundly change every school in the state, the visibility of OSS, and the attendant pressures of that responsibility, have grown apace.

Over the last half-year in particular, OSS has been consumed by a vast Statewide task of networking, as Colorado prepares to propose changes to our State Plan for NCLB.

6. OFFICE OF EDUCATOR LICENSING (20)

Led by Dorothy Gottlieb, Educator Licensing has long been responsible for the Department's efforts to strengthen the preparation and credentialing of teachers. Working closely with CCHE, which has joint oversight for the 16 teacher training institutions in the State, with CDE, has pursued the arduous task of bringing the Standards for teacher preparation into alignment with Colorado Standards.

Supported by reform legislation passed in 1999, this has involved working with 19 institutions in the process of program approval, which is jointly shared between the boards of CCHE and SBE.

Since the passage of NCLB, in 2002, the Professional Services Unit has, like others, been steadily magnetized towards the responsibilities involved in this huge piece of legislation.

The phenomenon of "Highly Qualified Teachers" has increasingly dominated the interactions between this Unit and the field.

7. LEARNING AND RESULTS (15)

Led by Jo O'Brien, this is the newest of the CDE units. Created for the express purpose of providing a link among the several Units involved with student achievement, Learning and Results (OLR) has worked to bring commonality to the enterprise of Standards and assessment and accountability.

The principle component, in terms of personnel, is the Assessment Unit; the smallest Technology (3 federally funded staff).

In recent times, OLR has also had the responsibility of implementing the SBE's ten-year calendar for the review of Standards. Beginning with Mathematics, and now engaged in Science, this process has involved a major outreach to teaching professionals throughout the State.

8. ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION (14)

Soon to be led by the newly appointed Dr. Barbara Medina, this wholly federally-funded Unit also includes responsibility for Migrant Education.

Formerly the Bilingual Education Unit, ELA underwent a major orientation under the leadership of Flo Lenhart. The keystone of major networking throughout the state, ELAU has worked to bring reasonable coherence and clarity of focus to services to children for whom English is a second language.

Like other units mentioned earlier, the ELAU has increasingly been drawn into the orbit of NCLB, as that legislation significantly touched the education of the nearly 90,000 children who make up our English Language Learner population.

9. OFFICE OF REGIONAL SERVICES (12)

Led by Dr. Gary Sibigroth, Regional Services is deceptively small in numbers, yet very large in influence.

Its members are linked, through a matrix, to all professionals in all other units who interact with school districts.

It is the responsibility of the managers of the eight CDE regions and their assistants, to be the primary contact with districts and facilitators for a wide range of services.

The centerpiece of their work is the system of Accreditation which has developed, over time, since the passage of the landmark Accreditation Accountability Act, of 1998.

Public sector agencies at any level or place are bureaucracies, and by their nature, cumbersome, prone to distraction, and difficult to focus or energize.

The degree to which this is true in any given agency is powerfully conditioned by size, i.e., the larger the agency the larger the problem. As the smallest State Education Agency in the nation (proportionate to the population of its State), CDE has a certain advantage, in that our relatively small size gives a degree of agility and cohesion that a larger agency might lack.

A second important corrective to bureaucratic tendencies is talent. Those who have watched State Education Agencies over many years know that a developing problem has been the quality of personnel.

Virtually every US State Education Agency is located in the State's Capitol city. This means that they are in a geographical area that, relatively speaking, has a higher cost of living. More importantly, they tend to be surrounded by larger metropolitan school districts which routinely provide better salaries and better benefits than the State makes available. Here in Colorado, we have seen this salary/benefit gap grow over the last decade, exacerbated by some three pay freezes.

Our response to this, in recent years has been to seek out people for whom the monetary element is not essential, which often means retirees with pensions who nonetheless have a strong desire to continue working, allied to a very high level of professional skill.

Overall, CDE is fortunate to possess a fairly strong cadre of talented people. There is no doubt, however, that the trend line, particularly in the wake of Proposition 23 and Referendum C is working against us. Every time we lose a senior person of substantial ability, it becomes a consuming imperative to fill the void with a highly capable replacement.

The third and most important variable, beyond size and talent, is leadership. These are the people at the very top tier of the aforementioned cadre.

Leadership, in an agency devoted to reform, requires certain special characteristics. First, is the ability to recognize and deal with the fact that what the agency is promoting a large proportion of the education community is not fond of. The second characteristic, which flows from the first, are the kind of communication skills that enable an individual to successfully promote even the unpopular elements of the reform program.

What the best leaders need most is a structure of governance i.e., a Board which is strongly supportive of its own program and has the willingness to consistently stand behind the people they send out into the field to advance it.

Such a Board, of course, must know that they, too, will fall heir, by varying degrees, to the aforementioned unpopularity.

To make all of these elements come together successfully requires the clearest understanding of the Mission and its ramifications. This includes an ability to see clearly the connection between Mission and resources.

If the Mission is allowed to go significantly beyond the available resources, it will weaken and begin to fail.

If the resources have a tendency to be diverted to other activities that are worthwhile, but not essential to the mission, again, the Mission will suffer.

We are now at a point where the State Board of Education and the Department of Education need to refocus on what we want the Mission to be, and how resources will be allocated.

When the Mission and resources achieve what the statisticians call "goodness of fit," then chances of success are optimized.

While we have no exhaustive list of particulars, we know, beyond any doubt, that there are activities we pursue – viewed as worthwhile by many – that simply are not essential to our core Mission. We must be willing to examine these closely, and where appropriate, discard nonessentials.

This task is not easy. It is contrary to most of the history of large bureaucratic organizations. It is difficult, because some of those discarded activities may be dearly beloved of some who will regard their disappearance as an illegitimate elimination of a service that they feel an absolute entitlement to.

If we wish to bring greater focus and intensity to those causes which we deeply believe in, those causes, such as the Learning Gap, which have a moral dimension, those causes that are in the long-term interest of Colorado children, then we must take the difficult course. We do so with a certain knowledge and confidence that it is the right thing to do.